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The Frisbee King returns to high school

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Some people have a blast at their high-school reunions, while others refuse to attend. I like ‘em.

At my 50th this weekend in Pittsburgh, we looked older. Some of us looked old. Several now use canes. I heard a lot of talk about cancer and hearts, along with the usual wear-and-tear stories about knees and backs.

Whatever sexual, semi-sexual or pseudo-sexual vibes might have been slinking around at earlier gatherings were not in evidence this time. Or maybe my vibesight is not as good as it once was.

More than one person observed that we looked like our grandparents.

One, however, didn’t. One stood out.

It’s hard to know what to say about the acknowledged Frisbee King of Key West—all 65 inches of him, 130 sinewy pounds, with a full head of hair over his shoulders and walnut-color skin that’s deeply etched from 45 years of living on the beach by his wits and with his Frisbees.

In high school he was all about athletics—basketball, baseball and volleyball. His teams won championships.

He’s still about athletics. He’s lean, in shape, quick and incredibly active. He says that he takes no medications and his one brush with hospitals was cataract surgery on both eyes.

He was the most entrepreneurial kid I knew, scratching up money from paper routes, fairs and hawking peanuts at sports events.

After graduating Michigan State, he began teaching in Columbus, Ohio, and enrolled in night law school. It was 1967, 1968.

He smoked his first marijuana joint at 21. Epiphany, he says. From that day, his perspective on the world and how life should be lived changed.

He quit his classroom and found California. The War was on. The draft fed it. Dope. He heard the sounds of the 60s. Some dove in; some didn’t; some never surfaced.

In the late 60s and 70s, he rolled from here to there, caroming off life’s bumper rails, wherever. He rambled through America and Mexico. He met celebrities; he almost died crewing on a yacht in a storm; he saw the inside of jails. He had no particular place to go, so it didn’t matter to him, he said, which side of the road he chose to hitch from.

He worked every patch on the bottom of our economy's barrel—shrimp boats, low-end carnivals, logging camps, grunt construction, fetching, carrying, hauling, lifting. He waited tables, washed dishes, mopped floors, cleaned toilets, picked fruit. He smoked and peddled small-time.

He discovered Frisbee in the early 70s. It fit his athleticism, his hand-eye coordination, his keen sense of how flying objects intersect with people. He says that he could always anticipate how a ball would bounce and how a cookie would crumble. He still can.

Thirty years ago, he rolled into Key West, Fl. He remembers it as a “do-as-you-want, pirate island” back then, the last station on the line, warm and laid back.

For a time in “Paradise,” he held jobs, paid rent and co-organized and played in softball, baseball and Frisbee leagues. He was a well-known, functioning member of the Conch community. And then employment dried up, and he slid into surviving.

He drifted into the nearby mangroves and slept on a recliner lawn chair under cardboard for almost 20 years. Some years ago, the National Park Service evicted the homeless from federal swamps around Key West. The City was court-ordered to provide shelter for them in lieu of arrest. The Frisbee King preferred life in the mangroves.

For the past several years, he's slept on Stock Island at the Keys Overnight Temporary Shelter (KOTS), which is organized by the Florida Keys Outreach Coalition. (www.fkoc.org).

The air-conditioned shelter provides clean sheets nightly and has seven bathroom facilities for its 140 “patrons.” He said the AC helps during the summer heat, but he's thoroughly chilled by early morning. He puts on layers of clothes around 4.

He told me that I couldn't imagine sleeping in the same room with several dozen alcoholics and addicts, “coughing, hacking, puking and spitting.”

The 26 in his pod sleep with their heads a few inches away from each other, rather than alternating head to feet. He says he'd rather smell stinky feet than breathe the “tubercular” breaths of those on either side of him. The white walls, he claims, now host an “infectious black mold.”

By 6:30 a.m. when the patrons leave, the bathrooms are “gross.” He says “you get used to it.” City prisoners clean them later in the day.

He insists to me that he is “home-less” [has less home than others], not homeless. It's a distinction that's important to him.

The Frisbee King lives on a \$463 monthly pension from Social Security, plus whatever he squeezes from his surroundings. Medicare and Medicaid are his other safety nets.

After leaving the shelter, he buys two hot dogs and a drink for breakfast from the Circle K convenience store on Kennedy Drive at Route 1—about \$3. He also buys a pack of 305's Filtered Cigars, Gold 100s, for \$1.06. He inhales. He has a smoker's voice and cough.

He may roust the trash can next to the Starbucks on Duval Street where tourists routinely toss their half-finished lattes. It's easy, he says, to make up a full 16-oz. cup from the garbage as long as you can handle a mixed drink.

He carries his life possessions in a backpack and duffel bag at all times. Frisbees, clothes, books, toiletries, keepsakes—the necessities, and the precious.

After breakfast, he conditions himself by pedaling his blue, one-speed, 26-inch, fenderless Schwinn for 22 miles around the island. He carries his 50-pound kit on his "truckin' bike," because he has no place to store it.

Key West is flat, but it's a hard workout in the summer when the temperature is often 90-degrees plus with high humidity. There's usually a breeze off the water, which, he says, seems to blow in his face as he does his laps.

He finishes around noon. He stops at the Circle K by the yacht basin for a \$1.29 iced chocolate milk. He then shaves and brushes his teeth in one of the six public restrooms at Bayview Park, a block from the Harborside Motel and Marina in one direction and the same from the Key West Police Department in another.

He pedals to Higgs Beach on the south side of the Island where, he says, "he's there to practice and work out, not to make money."

Nonetheless, The Frisbee King's routine can turn into a show for tourists at the restaurant near the volleyball courts. He'll start with the kids, teaching them the six throws. He'll do tricks in the sun. He jogs back and forth after his discs. He works. He sweats. He's exhausted by 4 p.m. He turns 68 in January.

His participatory shows can be disruptive or annoying. Discs can drift into the street, discombobulating tourists. To stir up an audience, he has been known to throw a Frisbee 100 yards down the middle of a street to attract onlookers. Volleyballers run him off the public courts. He and his Frisbees might scare some visitors.

He doesn't panhandle or pass a hat. He says he never has and never will. It's not part of his code, the code of his parents, Mildred and Jimmy.

Rather than beg when he was penniless, he sold the valuable afghan his mother had made for him. Five bucks, as I recall, maybe it was ten. Occasionally, a tourist slips him a bill.

Tourist-conscious Key West -- 2.65 million visitors in FY 2011 generated about \$11.3 million in bed tax alone -- prohibits panhandling and solicitation (selling something on the street for money without a permit) in its most-visited commercial and tourist areas. (City Ordinance 12-03, passed February 22, 2012) Approved panhandling and solicitation areas have been designated. The City says that this restraint-of-trade ordinance is directed at panhandling, not the homeless.

The Frisbee King tells me that he is a free-enterprise capitalist of the Ayn Rand school, though he admits to being a humanitarian who wants to feed the world's children on Frisbee plates distributed by the U.S. government.

He mourns the loss of altruism, the remains of which he finds in the volunteers who provide him and his peers a "nutritious, delicious" meal each evening, "with seconds and even thirds." (Foolish political consistency -- the hobgoblin of small minds, as Emerson said -- is neither his virtue nor mine.)

Supper is taken at Saint Mary's Soup Kitchen, a broadly based community-supported effort that provides 100 patrons about 2,000 calories each day, seven days a week, through one hot supper and a take-away bag lunch of two P&J sandwiches. (www.keywestcatholicparish.org; click on Soup Kitchen)

He used to manufacture cash by combing through retail-store dumpsters at night, looking for usable items he could sell at a steep discount. The T-shirt stores objected to their discards being sold the next day for a couple of bucks near their entrances. Same with lithographs, caps and everything else. He said he understood the objections these merchants raised to competition of his sort.

The Frisbee King is now prohibited from being around many spots where he once practiced entrepreneurial recycling. If he's caught trespassing, it's jail. His last stint of 29 days, he says, was spent in solitary confinement.

The City, he says, is increasingly hostile to the homeless who make tourists uncomfortable and are expensive to manage, either as prisoners or as roamers on the free range. Some locals believe The Authorities want to corral the homeless into a 24-hour, full-service facility to keep them away from the City's commercial and recreational assets. Criminalizing homelessness encourages the homeless to leave. The cost-conscious Mayor

draws a distinction between the deserving homeless and those who simply want to “scam the system.”

Why, I asked, can't The Frisbee King take his recycling program and his rogue afternoon Frisbee show into mainstream commerce?

It turns out that a mobile-vendor license costs about \$1,000 a year. (I'm assuming that he would sell from the basket of his bicycle, which is as mobile as he gets.)

But, it also turns out, that all 25 of these City licenses have been issued, and no more are available. The alternative would be to get a regular commercial license with all of what that entails—taxes, insurance, fees, forms, permits and inspections.

A street-performer's permit costs \$150, but Frisbee demonstrations and instruction are not one of this ordinance's permitted activities. Its language might even be construed meanly to define his Frisbee as a “weapon” akin to Oddjob's bowler, whose brim incorporated an Indian *chakram* with its outer edge sharpened for decapitating garden statues and Bond girls. The Authorities are not likely to grant him a special permit to do legally what they don't want him to do at all.

What would Ayn Rand say? The free market is not alive and well in Key West if you're down and out.

Practically speaking, friends of The Frisbee King might be able to fight it out with the City and get him a permit. But practically speaking, it's “too much bureaucracy” for him. It would be regulation, conformity and living within the lines. He would have a hard time handling it. He doesn't want to handle it because of the changes that would follow.

A permit could lead to a three-speed bike, which could lead to a bank account, which could lead to housing, which would inevitably lead to being captured by and becoming one of the “zombies,” which includes most of us.

Even if The Frisbee King could lift himself onto the lowest rung of business as usual, he thinks he'd lose who he is and betray his mission to bring food and Frisbee to the world's children. The more regular and conventional he becomes, the less independent, the less free. I think he thinks that he'd lose his dream if he changed “for the better.”

He said: “I am living the life I should for the trade I'm in and the things I want to accomplish.”

He is, he says, a “Frisbeetarian.” His 2012 run for the White House ended in defeat.

I'm not romanticizing an outlaw. He's said things and done things that were wrong. His dismissal of what's normal (with all of its freight) is self-protective. He doesn't have the wherewithal to get his raggedy self on the

first rung. He's been down too long. Down looks like up to him. And up is different and scary.

The Frisbee King is an overwhelming, consciousness-filling ball of energy who is literate, eclectically read, savvy beyond writing about reading people, charming, dense as a brick and, for all of his athleticism, crippled in the ways of the world. He's nimble and street-wise, but unable to move. He can frustrate friends and flimflam enemies. He's a pessimistic optimist locked into an underworld whose daily reality is never hopeful.

He spent several nights with us in Blue Grass. He brought us gifts—an author-autographed novel by Stuart Woods, aloe cuttings and a jar of Café Bustelo, instant espresso.

He surprised me by starting every meal with his homemade prayer. He wrote it this way: “Heavenly Father, Thank you for this Meal we are about to Partake. May we Honor it, Enjoy it, Respect it, and Practice Patience and Silence. And Grant us the Ability to Walk In -- On -- And Through this Earth at our own Pace. God Bless ALL the Wonderful People in this World who Deserve to be Blessed and FORGET...THE... REST.”

The Frisbee King has lived most of the last 40 years without a home as it's conventionally defined. The average life expectancy of a chronic homeless person is 47 years. At 67, he can teach us something about making it without ever making it.

He also has things to say about being home-less, which he both fears and values. He has insights into the homeless—many of the men are alcoholics or addicts of different types; many have given up; many are angry at their plight but not resilient enough to try to escape; some can be rescued if different standards of employability are used to start them off; many would prefer to just be left alone because anything more requires too much of whatever they can no longer muster.

He has dealt with depression and anger. He's worked through them on his own. The homeless have more reason to be depressed and enraged than most of us. Psychological support and mental-illness treatment, along with addiction therapies, are as important as a hot meal and a warm blanket.

Friends who are aware of his situation say, with reasonable justification, that he made choices along the way that led him to be this way, and he continues to make choices to stay where he is.

To me, it seems more a combination of choices and circumstances. How many of us are one uninsured hospital stay away from financial

disaster? How many of us can survive joblessness for more than a couple of years?

He is not unfamiliar with Doobies—marijuana cigarettes, and sticks of “spice” or “kush,” the synthetic marijuana of herbs and ever-changing chemicals that is now illegal because it’s so powerful and dangerous. He says he practices moderation in all things.

I’m not preachy or self-righteous about homelessness. Generally, I ignore panhandlers and avoid interaction. Sometimes -- with no consistency or reason -- I’ll fish out a five, ten or twenty. I don’t volunteer in a shelter or soup kitchen. We have neither in my county of 2,100. Maybe I would if we did.

I don’t have a policy agenda; I don’t know what to do. Homelessness strikes me as one of those things that everyone who is not, is against, and also one of those things that’s impossible to eliminate.

The Frisbee King wants me -- in his words, “our generation’s Mark Twain” -- to write his biography. Once I do this, he promises, it will become a bestseller and then a box-office-smash movie. He will become rich and able to feed children who are hungry, bring Frisbee to the Frisbee-less and validate the incredible effort he’s put in to his life.

His Twain flattery is just street hustle. I may not be Shinola, but I’m not that dull. Given that I carry a big-fat-sap gene, I acknowledge that I’m the guy who has now written twice about him. What he’s really asking for is a way to make his life count for something. He’s no different than most of us in that.

So...Twain lite promised The Frisbee King that he would write a column that might hook a biographer and a scriptwriter. Maybe Eric Hoffer and George Orwell can be found swimming in his rapids.

His story could be a good read and an intriguing movie. They are projects in need of projectors. Contact me if you know who might run with this ball.

I’ve told him to be prepared to be disappointed. Any commercial treatment of his life is not likely to be to his liking. It will leave out things he thinks are essential; it will include opinions he won’t like.

Maybe the \$8 billion for feeding and Frisbeeing the world that he anticipates receiving from the book and movie is a pipe dream in its original meaning. Still, a dream is a dream. It’s nice to have one at our age.

He told me: “Key West is my circle, and I’m always in one of its corners.” He’s being squeezed. He’s hanging on. A day will come that will not be just like all the others that came before.

Our Peabody High School Class of 1963 is hoping to get together in three years before we lose too many more. We’re all glad, of course, to have made this one.

I told The Frisbee King that I understood the courage it took for him to leave his hole and face his friends after 50 years. His classmates wanted him there. One drove him from Key West and back. Another hosted him in Pittsburgh.

At the reunion, he was greeted, welcomed, hugged and loved. His first girlfriend came. He sat with his teammates. Several ‘63s slipped him cash. He was, in his own fashion, the star of the show. Even those who frowned or shook their heads were glad he came and that he’s ok enough.

He had presence, dignity and discipline in high school. He still does.

Maybe, by the next reunion, The Frisbee King’s biography will be an ebook and on The New York Times list. Maybe his movie will be on DVD. Maybe he’ll be doing interviews on Oprah and showing Letterman how to throw “hammers” and “thumbers.”

Maybe...in America.

* Our friend, Paul Arons, brought The Frisbee King to our reunion and helped in researching this column.